

Morocco blocks port from Dutch 'abortion ship'

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Women's rights activists sail a small boat around a yacht harbor in Smir, northern Morocco on Thursday Oct 4 2012 to raise awareness about safe abortions, despite officials efforts to seal the port and anti-abortion protests on land. Organizers had initially said a large ship offering abortion information and services was on its way from the Netherlands on Thursday. In response, police sealed the port and denied journalists access. But in the afternoon, organizers admitted that they already had stationed a sailboat in the port several days ago, fearing that authorities would close the port. And that sailboat took off around the harbor bearing banners. Meanwhile, on land, about 200 protesters targeted the activists from "Women on Waves," the Dutch organization behind the boat.

Photograph by: Paul Schemm, AP

SMIR, Morocco — Women's rights activists sailed a small yacht around a harbour Thursday in northern Morocco to raise awareness about abortion, despite officials' attempts to seal the port and anti-abortion protests on land against the group.

The small sailboat was in sharp contrast to earlier reports from the Dutch group [Women on Waves](#), who had claimed that a large ship offering abortion information and services was on its way Thursday from the Netherlands.

The trip in the harbour of the Mediterranean coastal town of Smir was the abortion rights group's first event in a Muslim country.

Abortion in Morocco is illegal except in rare cases where the mother's life is threatened and it is also illegal to give out information about it. Moroccan officials had said the boat would not be allowed in and police sealed the port for what they called "military manoeuvres," denying journalists access.

But in the afternoon, activists from Women on Waves said they already had stationed a sailboat in the harbour several days ago, fearing the port would be shut down. And that boat took off around the harbour with banners advertising an information hotline for abortion.

Police later boarded the Dutch-flagged yacht and escorted it out of the marina.

"We launched a hotline that gives information to women here in Morocco, because the ship can never solve the problem here for everyone," said Rebecca Gomperts, the organization's founder.

The group's hotline contains a recorded message explaining which easily available medication in Morocco can be used to perform an abortion.

Some 200 protesters in Smir targeted the activists outside the sealed gates of the marina. The protesters, some in conservative Muslim robes and head scarves, carried pictures of bloody embryos and shouted "Terrorist!" and "Assassin!" at Gomperts, who was attempting to hand out flyers on abortion in Arabic and French.

"We are here because we cannot accept these values, the values of massacre," said protester Abdessamad Zilali, 23. "It is not part of our tradition to kill the unborn."

As shouting protesters tried to get closer to Gomperts, police pushed them back and she was escorted away for her own protection.

The Women on Waves boat was invited to Morocco by a local women's rights organization seeking the legalization of abortion in this North African kingdom.

The Moroccan government says the boat did not have permission to come.

Founded in 1999, Women on Waves aims to spread information about safe medical abortions through medication and has previously angered authorities in conservative Catholic countries.

The group has carried out campaigns in Ireland, Poland and Spain, and was banned from entering Portugal's waters in 2004.

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